What's Wrong with the Episcopal Church–and Is There a Remedy?

HAMILTON SCHUYLER

IT IS obvious that within the abridged limits of a magazine article it is impossible to discuss a subject of this importance except in its broadest aspects. There are so many things wrong with the Church in the judgment of the writer of this essay that to undertake to deal with the subject in detail would require a volume. For this task the present writer has neither the knowledge nor the inclination. All he aims to do is merely to present the subject for consideration, leaving it for abler pens, if so minded, further to develop the theme and draw the obvious conclusion.

The writer disclaims any special qualifications for his self-imposed effort. He is only one, as he believes, of many who are seriously concerned with the present state of the Church, and who look forward to the future with apprehension, not to say alarm. He believes that there are disruptive and disintegrating tendencies at work in the Church which, unless checked and corrected, will issue in disaster, or if not disaster at least in a gradual decline that is the prelude to ultimate extinction. Undoubtedly the Church is always facing a crisis, as a contemplation of its variegated history proves, but the significant thing today is that the cohesive elements which have hitherto kept the body from dissolution are palpably growing weaker and the process is being accelerated both from within and without in accordance with the spirit of the times, which is impatient of institutional Christianity where it is not directly antagonistic to it. Undoubtedly all Christian bodies, even the Roman Catholics, are suffering more or less from the same disease, but this fact affords small comfort to Churchmen. In this connection I am reminded of the story of one of our missionaries who in making a report to his bishop apologetically stated that there were only five accessions to membership during the year, "but," he added, with unconscious humor, "Thank God, the Presbyterians had even fewer."

However it may be with other bodies we are here concerned

primarily with the present and future state of the Episcopal Church in this country, since it is the body to which we belong and for whose welfare we are responsible. That other bodies, particularly the Protestant sects, are also impregnated with the seeds of decay is equally certain, but with this significant difference—the Protestant bodies are more homogeneous in their membership, their adherents share substantially the same general if vague doctrinal ideas and react to the same religious stimuli. Moreover no formal assent to a definite body of theological and liturgical principles is required of individuals by the genius of these bodies, and hence they can afford to be tolerant of wide differences which the Episcopal Church cannot do without surrendering its *raison d'être.* With the Protestant sects a general sympathy on the part of adherents with their aims and practices is all that is required, each congregational unit being the judge of the measure of agreement that is necessary, whereas with us unanimity of belief and conformity in practice are essential to the proper functioning and health of the body. With the Protestant bodies considered as a whole the great mass of members constitutes an element of longevity. They can afford to lose largely and will yet continue to survive for an indefinite period. Also, and this is said in no spirit of superciliousness, the vast majority of Protestants, as also of Roman Catholics, have the critical faculty less keenly developed than perhaps is the case with Episcopalians, and are therefore less likely to be affected by the intellectual difficulties that bulk so big today in the minds of the more sophisticated classes.

The Episcopal Church, it is well to remember, is a relatively small body in this country, representing in its membership hardly more than one per cent of the total population of the country, numbering probably one hundred and twenty millions, and hence if it is stationary or actually decreasing in numbers, as appears probable, this constitutes a serious matter, for with its present meagre membership any decline is deplorable and if continued spells disaster and that within appreciable limits of time.

In this inquiry, as the title of this essay indicates, I am concerned to deal with a question which might be framed specifically in the following terms:

Is the Episcopal Church on the decline and if so, what are the signs indicating this to be the case?

Let us consider at the outset the present state of the Church in point of numbers. The editor of the *Living Church Annual* for 1929 asks the question "Is the Church gaining in numbers in this country?" His reply is, "It is very difficult to tell." This is not a reassuring answer at best and at worst confirms a widespread impression that the Church, if not practically stationary, is certainly not growing. To be stationary in view of a steadily increasing population means that, as an organization, the Church is actually losing ground. According to the statistics there was an increase in 1929 over the previous year of about 25,000 communicants, a gain within the body, if the figures are fairly accurate, of about two per cent. There was an increase of about one per cent in ordinations. Candidates for Orders numbered just one person less than the previous year. Parishes and missions decreased by 33, which may mean little or nothing, as probably more might well go out of existence or be absorbed in other units without affecting strength or efficiency. Burials, if such can be placed upon the credit side, show an increase of over 4,000. But here are some really serious losses—baptisms decreased by over 3,000, confirmations by over 2,000, and most significant of all Sunday School scholars decreased by over 10,000 and Sunday School teachers by over 400. There was a negligible gain in contributions of some $75,000, over a grand total in 1928 of about forty-six million. These are figures that do not lend themselves to complacency and would seem upon the whole to foster a feeling of discouragement. The nominal membership of the Church as given in the returns from the parishes evidently far exceeds the active membership, as every rector is pathetically aware. It is an exceptional parish where the gains by Confirmations exceed the losses by deaths and more especially by lapses. The number of communions made at Easter is perhaps a true index of the active communicant list but there seems no way of securing these figures for the whole Church. From fifty to seventy per cent of those whose names are registered as communicants would perhaps in most parishes represent the approximate number of Easter communicants. Those who do not present themselves at least at Easter must probably be set down as a liability rather than an asset. One might hazard the guess that as much as thirty per cent of our enrolled membership might as well be written off. The Roman Catholics and ourselves are the only bodies that apply the ob-

jective test of reception of the Holy Communion as an evidence of the fidelity of their members. With most of the other bodies attendance more or less regular at the services coupled with contributions in support of the organization answers as a rough method of computing Church membership.

Now if the Episcopal Church is practically stationary in membership today what are the prospects for the future? Are the sources from which the Church might reasonably expect to gain fresh adherents propitious or, on the other hand, are they gradually drying up? Let it be observed that the Church gains little or nothing from immigration. Even from the offspring of original immigrants to the second and third generation there accrue few additions to our membership. In the city where this writer lives the population, though it has nearly doubled in the last thirty years, mainly through immigration, the Church has known but meagre growth. Out of a present population of about one hundred and twenty-five thousand the Roman Catholics with nineteen parishes claim a membership of nearly fifty thousand, while the Episcopal Church, though it was the first body here and has been established in the community for over two centuries, stands sixth among the religious bodies with an enrolled membership of about 3,300, or if all the baptised are included, as in the case of the Roman Catholics, say roughly from 4,000 to 5,000 persons.

I suppose it has to be admitted that the Episcopal Church at the present time appeals rather to the classes than the masses. Certainly it includes comparatively few representatives of the sturdy American middle-class stock, mechanics, small shopkeepers and farmers, the backbone of the country. Moreover Episcopalians are not prolific, they have few children and are likely to have less as the years advance. With the decay of home religion and the increasing indisposition of parents to send their children to the Sunday schools for religious instruction, the natural supply of fresh recruits to the Church is perceptibly diminishing and the process seems bound to continue. As to the outlook for the younger generation of Churchmen, the following figures from one of our older universities may be cited. Out of a total body of undergraduates numbering 2,200, 750 proclaim themselves adherents of the Episcopal Church, but the student pastor who keeps a careful record states that not more than twenty per cent of these are known to make their com-

munions at any time during the academic year. We gain, it is true, some new members from among the Protestant bodies, but this is an uncertain element and perhaps little more than offsets our losses to them through intermarriage. It certainly does not make up for the many lapses from our own body. We lose a few to the Roman Catholics by intermarriage and still others who are unsettled by the faulty teaching they receive in certain quarters and who pine for a more definite system and a more reassuring voice on matters of doctrine and morals.

Many of our communicants in removing from their homes fail to take Letters of Transfer and do not make their presence known to the rectors of parishes where they settle and are thus lost to the Church. Perhaps they occasionally attend the services but from motives of economy fail to identify themselves lest if they become known as *prospects* the ubiquitous Every-Member Canvassers should seek them out and solicit their contributions. Doubtless most of them, especially the younger people, mean to renew their official membership when their financial conditions improve, but at present they feel they have other and more pressing use for their money.

There are a few popular and fashionable churches in our large cities and important suburbs which, during a short season, have well-filled pews, though of the attendants many are admittedly strangers, but in the smaller towns and country districts this is palpably otherwise. If representatives of one-third of those whose names appear on the communicant list of the average parish are present at the main service on Sundays this is a large proportion. Where are the others? Either dawdling in their homes, reading the Sunday newspapers or listening in over the radio. Some are away from their homes on week-end visits, or if the day is pleasant are on the golf-links or whizzing through the countryside in their automobiles.

During the summertime in our fashionable seaside and mountain resorts, whither our wealthy Churchmen betake themselves, the services are slimly attended. I am familiar with a certain resort, largely frequented by Church folk, where formerly the little chapel was crowded to the doors and which today is seldom more than half-filled. In the large hotel where many Church people stay, it is safe to say that not ten per cent attended the services and among the delinquents as I happen to know, were not a few vestrymen and their families. Indeed

of those who attend the services of their home churches with more or less regularity a large proportion during the vacation season intermits attendance altogether.

That our missionary work is not progressing, but rather remains more or less stationary, owing presumably to lack of adequate funds to take up new fields, we are constantly having impressed upon us in plaintive tones. "Give us more money and we will increase the work," the authorities tell us, but the money, additional money, does not seem to be forthcoming. Rectors of parishes are groaning under the present burden of their quotas and it seems altogether unlikely that contributions to missions will increase in the future, but rather tend to fall off. Probably we have already reached the peak of giving and shall have to be content with holding our own, if we can even continue to do that.

The official status of communicants remains unsettled. There is no definite rule whereby the clergy can determine officially who are in good standing and who are not, and if an attempt is made in any particular instance to exercise discipline upon those adjudged defective the communicants in question specifically repudiate their allegiance or demand transfer to some other parish and are comomnly received there with open arms. Practically we are congregational in our methods and every rector does what is right in his own eyes. The bishops have little real power over the clergy or their parishes, and in certain cases perhaps it is well that they have not, for if they had such power some bishops as things are would undoubtedly quench the smoking flax of a more Catholic order.

Concerning Divorce and the grave question of Birth Control the Church speaks, when it speaks at all, with an uncertain voice. Our Divorce Canon is specific up to a certain point; it tells the clergy what they must refrain from doing but it does not lay down any dicipline for lay offenders and practically leaves their status as communicants to be determined by the individual rector.

The clergy are far too casual in their ministrations. They do not adequately exercise their priesthood or sufficiently emphasize the necessity of the sacraments, or at least dismiss the subject with an occasional sermon instead of insisting, in season, out of season, that any profession of Christianity apart from reception of the sacraments avails little or nothing. Moreover

in many parishes the Holy Eucharist is not emphasized as the main service for each Lord's Day and a choir office is substituted for it, thus leaving the congregation with the impression that it is one of the "Occasional Offices" of the Church and not pre-eminently of obligation upon all the faithful.

Confirmation candidates are often so casually gathered in and so ill-prepared to assume their duties as communicants that they lapse in a short time and tend to increase the ranks of the careless and indifferent. I know of a rector of a medium-sized parish who was assiduous in collecting large classes of confirmation candidates every year, but being asked by the bishop who became suspicious of this large annual harvest, "What become of these multitudes?" replied nonchalantly, "God knows, for I don't."

Candidates for Holy Orders are evidently not increasing and under present conditions perhaps it is better that they are not, for a diminishing lay membership will need fewer pastors. Careers in the ministry today are not attractive either from the point of earning a living or that of exerting personal influence. Today the unemployed cleric over forty years of age finds difficulty in placing himself. Parishes when choosing a new rector commonly prefer younger men. Even the Episcopate seems to lack its former glamour, judging from the fact that not a few recently who have been chosen to that high office hesitate to qualify for it. It is evident that there are lean years ahead for the clergy, and young men who by their church inheritance, gifts and piety should be capable of acceptable service to the Church, may well hesitate before deciding to choose the ministry as their life work unless they possess the spirit of heroic self-sacrifice, the "Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel."

While party spirit has apparently declined in the Church and men of all schools of Churchmanship have learned to treat each other with increasing courtesy and good will, the rift between them is no less real and wide. If the old Evangelical type has practically disappeared the broads and the modernists still remain with an ever-increasing number of the Catholic-minded. The divisive and irreconcilable elements which can never coalesce because they are sundered by principles may agree in a truce for a period, but ultimately they are bound to come into open conflict. Compromise and concession may prevail for a time, but paraphrasing the dictum of Lincoln regarding the

slavery issue—this Church cannot continue to remain permanently half Catholic and half Protestant.

Wide differences in teaching on fundamental doctrines and visible divergence in liturgical and ritual practices tend to dishearten the clergy and to confuse the laity, and thus to weaken the sense of corporate unity. The clergy who are loyal to the teaching of the Prayer Book and scrupulous in observing the Canons find themselves embarrassed in dealing with their parishioners, who are aware that the claims of orthodoxy are flouted in high quarters and the plain provisions of ecclesiastical law violated with easy impunity. It may be argued that these laxities and anomalies have always prevailed in the Church and that conditions are no worse now than they always have been. Compromise, it is urged, is of the very genius of the Episcopal Church and much leeway has always been conceded in the interest of different schools of Churchmanship.

It is of course true that the Episcopal Church is tolerant of wide differences, even to the extent of suffering heretical or semi-heretical teaching on the theory that, as its own formularies are essentially sound, more harm than good would result from an active effort to purge out the leaven of false doctrine. But a body which complacently tolerates error because it lacks the energy to rid itself of elements which are subversive of its health and welfare proves that it is lacking in proper self-assertion and ultimately must lose the respect of those to whom religious truth, and not comprehensiveness, is the greatest of virtues. Personally, I have always felt that there was a good deal of logic in the contention of those accused of holding heretical beliefs that it was not their duty to withdraw voluntarily from the communion of the Church, but rather it was the business of the Church to eject them as any secular society does when a member offends against its rules. Why take the initiative themselves and get out because the constituted authorities are unwilling to act? If the sentiment of the Church is against all trials for heresy, why should any man make a martyr of himself? Why not remain and contend from within for his own opinions?

When the conflict in the Church was mainly between the old-fashioned high and low Churchmen the situation was not so serious, but now that the former high Churchmen have developed into uncompromising Catholics and their opponents are

not the Evangelicals but the broads and the modernists the conditions are different. As time goes on the neutral or middle-of-the-road elements will tend to affiliate themselves with one extreme or the other and then we may expect things to reach a crisis for the Church will be too small to include both parties. In the meanwhile these fundamental differences in the body will continue to sap its strength and vitality.

As an offset to these melancholy facts and figures perhaps it may be true to say that with an ever increasing number of the indifferent there seems to be a deeper religious interest and devotion on the part of the faithful few. In the absence of any social pressure or expectation of worldly advantages, it may be assumed that those who regularly attend the services and receive the Holy Communion do so from the purest motives. With nothing to gain but spiritual blessings, the number of those who prize the Church and its ministrations is perhaps relatively greater than in former years. It is always the faithful remnant that keeps religion alive and preserves its intrinsic values for posterity.

Probably many who read this jeremiad, even if they do not deny the main premises, will be disposed to regard the conclusions as too pessimistic. Conditions it may be admitted are serious, but the outcome need not necessarily imply disaster. It is conceded that the whole Christian world is in a ferment at present and that things are growing ripe for some crisis. Out of the present religious stress and welter it is hoped that some good results may issue. We are assured that God will not forsake His Chuch, that the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. Such is our confident hope. But will the Episcopal Church as a minor section of the Catholic body continue to survive? That is our present concern. Does it deserve to survive? What, as at present constituted, has it of esesntial value to offer to mankind? Is there any evidence that the hearts of American people are turning towards the Episcopal Church with the hope and expectation of finding in its bosom a religious haven and a true home for the spirit? Are we ourselves satisfied that the future holds a firm assurance of our permanence? Outside the little group that today comprises the Episcopal Church and prefers its ways and ministrations how would its passing as an organization affect the spiritual welfare of the multitudes of Christians beyond its borders or make any difference to the mil-

lions of the indifferent or unreligious? These are questions of no mere academic interest to be dismissed with an impatient shrug of the shoulders as the mere vaporings of a pessimistic observer. It is futile to give ourselves the Coué treatment and think to cure the patient by reiterating the self-delusive phrase "We are getting better and better every day and in every way." The conditions call for a remedy not merely psychological but which will go to the root of the matter. Is there such a remedy? I believe that there is, if we have the faith and the courage to apply it.

The present writer would like to believe that his diagnosis of the case is a mistaken one, perhaps due to the disillusionment of advancing years and hopes that others who are imbued with a more optimistic spirit will undertake to refute his gloomy prognostications. He has expressed his belief that a remedy is possible, but suspects that any solution he might offer would contain too many radical suggestions to prove acceptable to the minds of most of his brethren.

Having now as a sort of *advocatus diaboli* presented the question on its worst side he is content, without apology, to leave the solution to others more competent to deal with the subject.